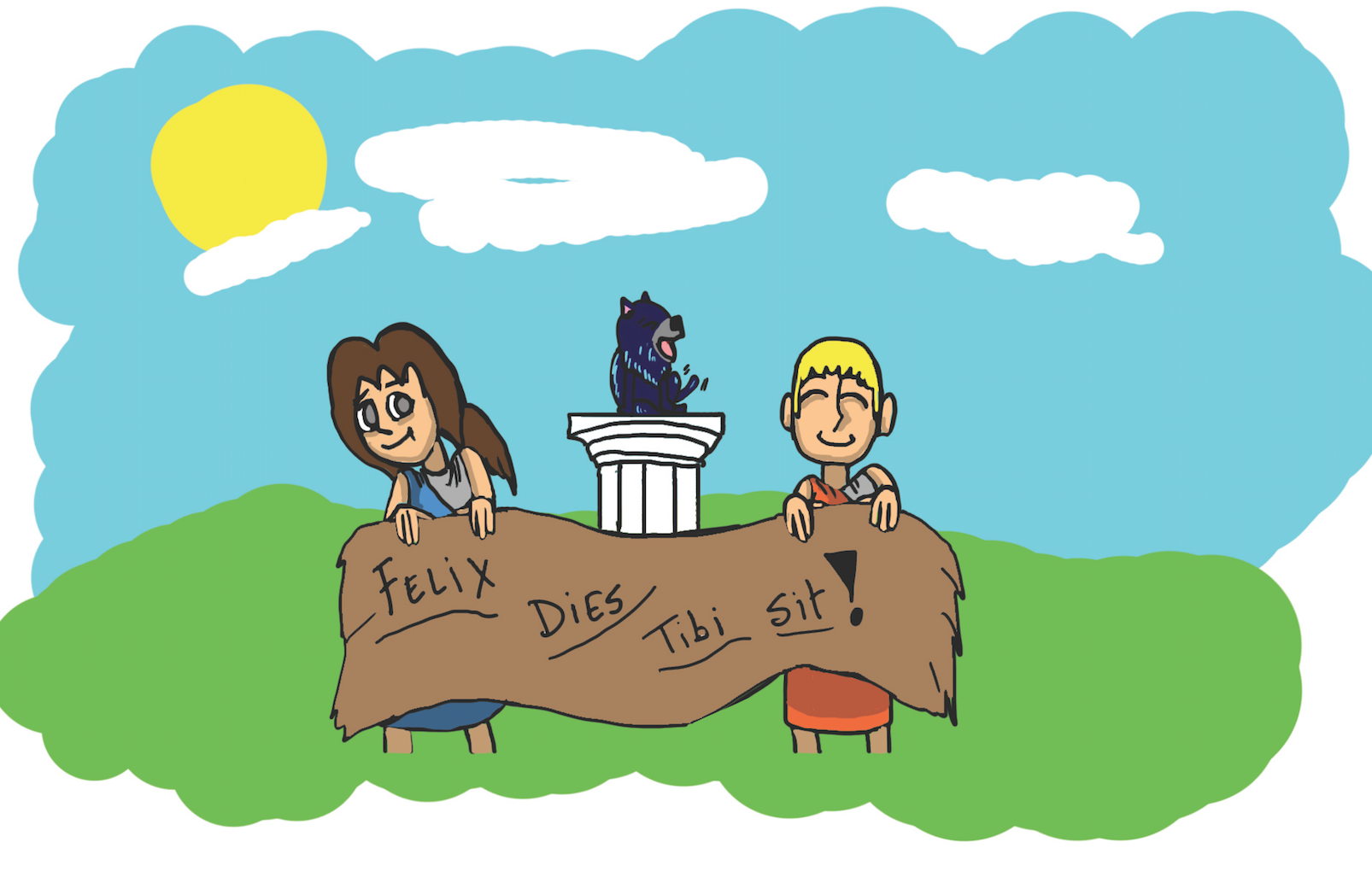
**Meet the Heroes**

The year is 286 AD and the Roman Empire is in shambles. Emperors come and go almost faster than coins can be minted in their image and the threat of invasion by angry Germanic tribes is imminent. Through the streets of Rome, a young girl deftly darts amongst the carts and curtain-covered litters, her thick brown hair tied hastily back and her bright gray eyes are almost playful. Her name is Astra and today is her birthday. She narrowly misses running into a skittish mule as its owner struggles to calm the animal in the crowded streets. Before the traffic clogs behind him, Astra has already skipped to the opposite side of the street and continues on her way, unbothered. It’s no wonder she’s so quick on her feet – her father is an admired Roman centurion. But he’s not here to celebrate with her today. Many years ago and still in his prime, he retired to Rome and joined his uncle in managing a gladiatorial school, but recently the newest emperor called for extra troops to be sent to the frontier. Her father dutifully departed, but before he left, he was determined to train his daughter thoroughly in his craft – everything from how to predict the movements of her environment to how to spit orange seeds a record length across the palaestra. Astra had never known her mother and was now under the care of this aloof great-uncle, who was constantly busy training gladiators and taking care of exotic beasts. For most girls, the lack of her guardian’s attention could be devastating, but Astra’s confidence is unshaken and she knows her city well. She’s on her way to celebrate her birthday with her best friend, Tempus. He is waiting for her near the column of Trajan …with a surprise.



Chapter I

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